



MINERAL COUNTY, WV

BLACK RIVER

A NOVEL

Matthew Spence

BLACK RIVER

By Matthew Spence

CHAPTER ONE: GREEN WOOL

The green wool still fit.

Cal Dawson stood on the frost-heaved porch of a double-wide on Knobley Mountain and pulled at the hem of his uniform trousers, an old habit from his academy days. The wool was state-issue, crisp, heavy enough to keep the wind out. It was supposed to make you look bigger than you were. More certain.

Inside the trailer, a man was screaming that he was going to kill his wife if she called the sheriff again. Outside, the wife was in Cal's cruiser, wrapped in a state police blanket, holding a baby that wasn't crying yet, which worried Cal more than if it had been.

Deputy Frank Miller stood beside him, too close, too eager. He was twenty-four, with a buzz cut that was still growing in from his time in the National Guard, and he wore the tan shirt of the Mineral County Sheriff's Department like it was a costume he was trying to earn.

"She says he's got a shotgun," Miller whispered. He had his hand on his Glock, already unsnapped.

"He doesn't," Cal said quietly. "He's got a .30-30 with a busted stock. I took it off this same porch in February. He keeps it under the kitchen sink because his old man told him never to keep a loaded gun near the bed."

Miller blinked. "How do you know that?"

"Because I've been up this mountain forty times, Frank. You learn the houses before you learn the people."

Cal knocked. Three flat, official raps.

"Mr. McDonald? West Virginia State Police. We need to talk to you on the porch, sir."

The screaming inside stopped. A chair scraped. The door, swollen with winter, yanked open and a man in a thermal shirt and jeans filled it. Raymond McDonald, forty-seven, laid off from the Luke paper mill three years ago and never quite found the next thing. He smelled of cheap whiskey and woodsmoke. His eyes were red.

"Where's the Sheriff?" he spat. "I don't want state boys. I want Tom Burke."

"Sheriff Burke's on a county call in Keyser," Cal said. It was a lie. Burke was at the diner. But Raymond McDonald respected Burke, and Cal needed him to respect someone. "He asked me to come up here personally. Says he don't want you back in his jail again, Raymond. Says it embarrasses your momma."

That did it. Raymond's shoulders dropped an inch.

"She called you," he said, looking past Cal to the cruiser.

"She called us because the baby's got a fever and you got the only truck," Cal said. His voice never rose. "Let me get her to the clinic in Keyser, and you and me will sit on that porch and let you tell me what's really got you tore up. No cuffs. No paperwork. Not tonight."

Miller shifted his weight. This was not how they taught it at the academy in Romney. This was not procedure.

Raymond looked at Cal's green wool, at the badge that caught the weak mountain light, at Miller's hand still hovering near his gun. He looked at his wife in the cruiser.

He stepped out onto the porch in his socks and sat down hard on the top step. He put his head in his hands.

Miller exhaled like he'd been holding his breath for an hour.

Twenty minutes later, the ambulance Cal had called on his personal radio took the wife and baby down the mountain. Raymond was still on the step, talking now, about the power bill and the mill and his father. Cal listened.

When Cal finally stood to leave, Miller was staring at him like a kid watching a magician.

"How'd you know he didn't have the shotgun anymore?" Miller asked as they walked to their vehicles.

"I didn't," Cal said. "I guessed. But if you tell a man what he has, he starts believing you know everything else, too."

Miller laughed, nervous and loud. "Jesus, Cal. They're gonna make you a Sergeant next month for sure."

Cal buckled his seatbelt. The wool itched at his neck like it always did in March.

"I don't want Sergeant, Frank," he said. "I just want the mountain to stay quiet."

Down below, in the valley, a black Ram 2500 with West Virginia plates that weren't West Virginia plates rolled across the bridge over the North Branch and disappeared into the trees. Cal watched it go in his rearview, just another truck, and thought nothing of it.

CHAPTER TWO: THE COAL BREAKER

Seven years earlier, the air inside Emoryville breaker tasted like old pennies and coal dust that would never settle.

Cal was twenty-three and still had to shave every other day to prove he could grow a beard. He was on a ride-along with Sheriff Tom Burke, who was not yet Sheriff, just Deputy Burke, broad-chested and already balding, who drove like the roads were suggestions.

"We got a runner," Burke said, slapping the dash. "Dispatch says Vance kid from up Elk Run. Marcus. Nineteen. Known associate. He was cooking in the breaker last summer."

Cal held onto the door handle as the county cruiser fishtailed up the access road. The breaker was a skeleton of rusted iron and conveyor belts that hadn't moved since 1987. It loomed over the hollow like a church.

"He's not cooking," Cal said, squinting through the cracked windshield. "There's no smoke."

"He's stashing," Burke said. "Same difference. State wants numbers this quarter."

They found Marcus's old Toyota pickup half-hidden under a collapsed loading chute. The tailgate was down. Inside, under a blue tarp, were two duffels.

Burke drew his .38 and grinned. "Jackpot."

Marcus Vance was not in the truck. He was fifty yards up, on the third tier of the breaker, watching them. Cal saw him first - a thin kid in a hoodie, all shoulders and eyes.

"Police! Don't move!" Cal yelled, and then he was running, because Marcus was running.

The chase was stupid and dangerous. The breaker was rotten. The catwalks swayed. Every step kicked up black dust that burned the throat. Marcus knew the path; Cal didn't. Marcus vaulted a missing section of walkway that Cal had to go around. Shale slid under Cal's boots.

On the second level, Cal caught a handhold and swung, tackling Marcus from behind into a pile of loose slate. They hit hard. Marcus fought like an animal, elbowing, biting, scrambling. Cal felt a sharp heat on his forearm as Marcus's pocketknife opened him up.

They rolled. Cal came out on top, pinning Marcus's arms with his knees, both of them panting, bleeding. The gash on Cal's forearm was deep, already soaking his sleeve.

Marcus stopped fighting. He just stared up, chest heaving, blood on his lip.

"Go ahead," he spat. "Add assault on an officer. Make it ten years."

Cal zip-tied him, breathing hard, and dragged him down to where Burke was already going through the duffels.

"Five ounces, uncut methamphetamine," Burke announced, holding a baggie to the light like he'd found gold. "Beautiful. Vance, you're finally gonna be somebody."

"That's not mine," Marcus said.

"Sure it ain't."

Back at the barracks, Cal wrote the report. While Burke counted the drugs, Cal searched Marcus's truck. Under the passenger seat, he found a Manila envelope. Inside were not more drugs, but receipts. Burlington Pharmacy. Fresenius Medical Care. A letter from Potomac Valley Hospital.

Dialysis. Three times a week. \$400 a session after insurance. A name: Lena Vance, age 19.

Cal walked into the interview room where Marcus sat cuffed to the table, his face swelling.

"Your sister?" Cal asked, sliding the envelope across.

Marcus didn't touch it. "Don't."

"Five ounces is intent to deliver. That's ten years. You know that."

"She's all I got," Marcus said, his voice cracking for the first time. "Mom's gone. Dad's gone. You think I like running for Cobb?"

Cal looked at the kid - really looked. Not a kingpin. A poor ridge kid who saw one door.

At the preliminary hearing, Cal testified. He told the truth: He had seen the truck from the road without probable cause for a search of the breaker structure, which was posted private property under the coal company. The initial cabin search lacked a warrant. The evidence was fruit of the poisonous tree.

The judge threw out three ounces. The prosecutor, furious, offered a deal. Possession, not intent. Two and a half years, with time served halved for cooperation.

Burke cornered Cal in the hallway after.

"You cut his sentence in half," Burke hissed, not angry, but studying him. "You know what that does? It makes you look weak. It makes us look sloppy."

"It makes us look honest," Cal said, pressing gauze to his forearm. The cut would scar. It would twinge every time the humidity spiked. "He wasn't a killer, Tom. He was a kid with bills."

Burke stared at him a long second, then clapped him on the shoulder, hard.

"That's why I'm gonna recruit you to State, kid. You got a conscience. That's rare. That's dangerous."

Outside the courthouse, Marcus walked past Cal in an orange jumpsuit, hands cuffed in front. His sister Lena was waiting on the steps, thin and pale, hooked to nothing for the first time in months.

Marcus stopped. Looked at Cal.

"You still put me in a cage," he said.

Cal nodded. "I did my job."

Marcus held his gaze. "Yeah. And I remember who did it right."

CHAPTER THREE: THE EVIDENCE LOCKER

The DUI checkpoint on Route 46 was Burke's idea.

"State's got a grant," Burke told Cal over the phone, eight months before the rain. "You boys need to show presence on 46. Too much West Virginia weed coming up from Virginia."

Cal knew it was bullshit. Route 46 was dead after 10 p.m. But a grant was a grant, and Trooper First Class Dawson didn't argue with grants.

He set up just past the Iron Horse Tavern with two cones and his cruiser's lightbar turning the wet asphalt blue. Miller, who was now riding with the state police as part of a cross-training program, was with him.

"Man, this is dead," Miller said, checking his phone. It was 1:14 a.m. The rain had started, that hunting rain that never really fell straight.

Headlights came around the bend. A blacked-out Ram 2500, lifted, dually rear axle, West Virginia plates but with a Dixie County, Alabama registration sticker half-scraped off. The truck slowed.

Cal waved it down.

The window rolled down two inches. The driver was a white man in his thirties, shaved head, neck tattoo of a cross. Ellis Cobb. Cal knew the name from the intel board in Romney. Dixie Syndicate, distribution. But the board photo was blurry, and this man had a clean shave and a high-vis yellow rain jacket.

"License and registration," Cal said.

The man produced them without a word. Virginia license. Clean. No warrants. The truck's registration came back to a shell LLC in Winchester.

"Where you headed tonight, Mr. Cobb?"

"Home."

"You got anything in the truck I should know about?"

"No sir."

Cal shone his flashlight into the bed. Empty, but the tie-down hooks were scratched fresh, and there was a heavy-duty plastic seal - red - in the corner of the bed, snapped.

Cal's gut tightened. Red seal. He remembered that from a DEA bulletin.

"You haul freight, Mr. Cobb?"

"I haul whatever I'm paid to haul."

Miller stepped forward, eager. "Mind if we take a look in the back, sir?"

Cobb looked at Miller, then at Cal, and smiled. It was a terrible, empty smile.

"Sure," he said. "You got a warrant?"

Cal had no probable cause. No smell. No plain view. Just a plastic seal and a feeling.

"You're free to go," Cal said. "Drive safe in the rain."

The Ram pulled away, diesel growling, and disappeared toward the Maryland line. The taillights bled into the wet dark.

Miller was furious. "Cal, come on, that was him! That was the guy from the photos! We could have -"

"We could have gotten sued and lost our jobs," Cal said, clicking off his flashlight. "You don't search a Syndicate truck without a wire. You know that."

Miller kicked a cone. "Burke would have searched it."

"Burke's not State," Cal said.

That night, Cal logged the stop and put his gear in his locker at the Romney barracks - duty belt, radio, and his service sidearm, a .357 Magnum Smith & Wesson 686 with custom walnut grips, a gift from his father.

He drove home to his small house outside Keyser and slept.

At 06:00 the next morning, his phone rang. It was Captain Harris from Internal Affairs.

"Dawson, where's your weapon?"

Cal sat up. "In my locker. Like always."

"Open your locker, Trooper."

Cal drove to Romney, opened his locker. The holster was there. The gun was not.

The evidence log showed it had been checked out at 03:22 a.m. by "TFC C. Dawson" with Cal's badge number. The signature was a forgery, but a good one.

The suspension was immediate. Pending investigation for misplacement of a service weapon, potential sale. The union rep wouldn't look him in the eye.

Cal walked out of the barracks in his civilian clothes, carrying his green wool in a plastic bag.

Burke was waiting in the parking lot, leaning against his county cruiser, drinking coffee.

"Heard about the locker, kid," Burke said, not unkindly. "These things happen. You were tired. You left it in your truck."

"I didn't," Cal said.

Burke sipped his coffee. "You know, State never liked you being so... careful. All that probable cause talk. Makes it hard to get things done."

Cal stared at him. For the first time in ten years, he saw something behind Burke's fatherly eyes that wasn't fatherly at all. It was flat. Calculating.

"You tell me if you need anything, Cal," Burke said, tossing his coffee cup into the bed of a truck.

"County takes care of its own."

Cal watched him drive away. Then he went home and found the state police cruiser sitting outside his house. Not a courtesy call. A cruiser waiting to see if he ran.

Inside, on his kitchen table, was a newspaper. The Mineral Daily News-Tribune. Below the fold:
DEPUTY FOUND SLAIN BY RIVER - STATE POLICE SEEK FORMER TROOPER FOR QUESTIONING.

Deputy Miller. North Branch of the Potomac. Two bullets from a .357 Magnum in his chest.

Cal's phone buzzed. One text, from an unknown number. Miller, sent at 2:11 a.m., three hours before he died.

BLACKWOOD. THEY'RE USING BLACKWOOD.

Cal put the truck in park outside the Iron Horse Tavern, killed the headlights, and stepped into the mountain chill.

Here are Chapters 4-6 - this is where the short story you wrote becomes the novel.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE BODY

Cal didn't go home after Miller's text.

He drove straight to Blackwood.

The old boat launch had been closed since the flood of '96 took the lower half of the ramp and the county never found the money to pour new concrete. A chain hung across the gravel turn-in, but it had been cut years ago and lay in the weeds like a dead snake. Cal left the F-150 on the shoulder of Route 46 and walked in on foot, his old Maglite heavy in his hand even though he wasn't a cop anymore.

The rain had stopped by then, but the river hadn't. The North Branch was up, black and fast, chewing at its banks. It smelled of cold mud and iron.

He found Miller's cruiser first.

It was parked at an angle in the clearing, driver door open, lightbar off. The radio was still hissing static. Miller was slumped over the center console, his tan Sheriff's Department shirt dark in two places high on his chest. His eyes were open.

Cal didn't touch him. Ten years of training kept his hands at his sides. He stood in the rain and looked at the boy who had wanted to be a Trooper.

Two wounds. Tight grouping. Close range. No defensive wounds on Miller's hands. Whoever shot him, Miller knew. He'd rolled his window down for him.

Cal circled the cruiser. The dashcam bracket was empty, wires hanging. In the passenger footwell, Miller's personal cell phone was face-down in an inch of water that had come in through the open door. Cal picked it up with his sleeve.

No lock screen. Miller's last outgoing call was to Cal at 2:11 a.m. Last photo taken: 2:13 a.m. A blurry shot through a wet windshield of a white tractor-trailer backing toward the water.

And in the mud by the rear tire - a boot print. Not Miller's hiking boots. A work boot, deep tread, with a distinctive notch on the heel. Cal knew that notch. Every Mineral County Sheriff's Department-issued Danner boot had it from the factory.

He heard sirens then. Far off, coming down 46 from Keyser.

Cal ran.

He didn't run because he was guilty. He ran because he knew how this looked. Suspended Trooper, missing service weapon that was the murder weapon, found standing over the body of the deputy who idolized him at the exact smuggling drop Miller had texted him about.

He got back to the F-150 as the first blue lights cut through the trees. He drove without headlights for a mile, until he hit the logging road that cut up toward the fruit barn his uncle used to own.

He parked and finally read the rest of Miller's text thread. One more message, unsent, in the drafts at 2:14 a.m.:

burke is here cal burke is here with cobb

Cal put his head against the steering wheel and said Miller's name out loud, once.

The Mineral County Sheriff's Department found Miller at 4:30 a.m. At 6:00 a.m., Burke himself called Captain Harris in Romney.

"Cap, it's Tom. We got a problem. Ballistics is preliminary but it's a .357. It's Dawson's missing piece. I had a bad feeling when we suspended him. Kid's been drinking. He and Miller had a fight last week over a case. I'm sending a unit to his house right now."

At 6:15 a.m., Cal watched from the tree line behind his own house as a county cruiser pulled into his driveway. Two deputies he had trained with knocked on his door. When no one answered, they tried the handle.

Cal left the ridge and drove to the only place in the county where no one would look for a cop.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE TAVERN

The Iron Horse Tavern had been there since the mines were open. It had a neon sign that buzzed even when it was off, a floor that was always sticky, and a rule that nobody talked about what they saw in the parking lot.

The rain in Mineral County didn't fall; it hunted. It slicked the hairpin turns of Route 46 and turned the runoff ditches into brown, churning torrents.

Cal stared through the cracked windshield of his rusting F-150, watching that neon sign bleed into the wet dark. Six months ago he wore the crisp green wool. Tonight he wore a fugitive's desperation and a baseball cap that wasn't his.

He put the truck in park, killed the headlights, and stepped into the mountain chill.

The tavern smelled of stale beer, damp denim, and fried grease. Cal pulled his cap low, but in a town of two thousand people, anonymity was a myth. Heads turned. Whispers died.

Lena Vance saw him first.

She was behind the bar, wiping glasses with a rag that had seen better decades. She was twenty-six now, not nineteen. Dialysis had thinned her as a teenager, but sobriety and time had filled her back in. She had her brother's eyes and none of his softness.

She went still.

Cal slid onto a stool at the far end, away from everyone. Lena walked over, slow, and set a glass of water down hard enough to slosh.

"You got a lot of nerve," she said, low enough that only he could hear.

"I need to talk to Marcus."

"He's got six months left on parole. He doesn't need you."

"Deputy Miller is dead, Lena. They found him at Blackwood. They think I did it."

Lena's hand tightened on the rag. Frank Miller had once driven her to the hospital when Marcus couldn't. She remembered.

"Did you?"

"No."

She studied him for a long second, the way people in this valley study a river before they cross it.

"He's in the back," she said finally. "Playing Keno. If you get him killed, Cal Dawson, I will bury you myself and I won't lose sleep."

She disappeared through a doorway. A minute later, the back door opened and the cold came in.

Marcus Vance looked exactly like a man who had survived five years in Mount Olive Correctional Center. His shoulders were broad, his face mapped with a hard, unreadable stillness. He wore a clean white t-shirt under an open flannel, prison bulk still on him. He was tracing the rim of a whiskey glass with a scarred thumb — a scar Cal had given him during that foot chase through the coal breaker seven years ago.

He didn't look surprised to see Cal. He looked tired.

Marcus sat down. He didn't offer a hand.

"You're a long way from the barracks, Trooper," he said.

"I don't go to the barracks anymore," Cal said, his voice raw.

"I heard," Marcus said, finally turning his head. His dark eyes were cold, assessing. "I also heard the state police are looking for you. Something about a dead deputy. Funny how the universe balances out, isn't it?"

"I didn't kill Miller, Marcus."

Marcus let out a low, humorless laugh. "Tell it to the magistrate. I'm just a guy on parole trying to enjoy a drink. And if memory serves, you're the guy who ensured I spent half a decade eating prison slop."

"I did my job. You had five ounces of uncut meth in your trunk." Cal leaned in, dropping his voice to a harsh whisper. "But I also testified that the arresting deputy lacked probable cause for the initial cabin search. I got your sentence halved, Marcus. You know the law in this county is crooked, and right now, it's twisting around my neck."

Marcus paused, his glass halfway to his mouth. The anger in his eyes flickered, replaced by a sharp, calculating curiosity. The mention of the testimony was a key only the two of them had.

"Why come to me?" Marcus said.

"Because you know the underbelly of this ridge better than anyone, and you're the only person in this valley who hates the Sheriff's department more than I do," Cal said, placing a crumpled piece of paper on the bar. It contained Miller's coordinates, copied from the phone, and a date. "Miller was tracking something before he died. Something big. They're pinning it on me to close the case and bury whatever he found."

Lena, from behind the bar, put a second whiskey down in front of Marcus without being asked.

Marcus looked at the paper, then back at the man who had once worn the badge. A slow, dangerous smile spread across his face.

"The cop wants a criminal to play detective," Marcus murmured. "Alright, Dawson. Let's see if you survive the night first."

He folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

"We need a truck that isn't yours. And we need to go before Tom Burke's nephew, who is sitting in that booth behind you pretending to be on his phone, finishes texting Burke that you're here."

Cal didn't turn around.

"How much time?"

"About three minutes. Let's go out the back. Lena, if anyone asks, we were never here."

Lena nodded, already picking up their untouched glasses.

CHAPTER SIX: BLACKWOOD

The storm peaked as the F-150 rattled down a logging road that hadn't seen maintenance since the timber mills closed in the nineties. Marcus had made them take Lena's beat-up Chevy S-10 instead of Cal's Ford — "Your truck's got a BOLO on it, Trooper, you wanna wear a sign?" — but at the last minute Cal had insisted on the F-150 because he knew the road and the Chevy's four-wheel-drive was busted.

Marcus sat in the passenger seat, his eyes tracking the dark wall of pines. In his lap, he balanced a heavy, yellow-cased flashlight that Lena kept behind the bar for when the power went out.

"Two miles left," Cal said, his hands tight on the wheel. "The coordinates place Miller's last known cell ping right near the old Blackwood boat launch."

"That launch has been choked with silt and river weeds for ten years," Marcus replied, his tone flat. "Nobody uses it unless they're dropping something they don't want found."

Cal glanced at Marcus. The tension between them was a physical presence in the cab. Seven years ago, Cal had been the hunter, tracking Marcus's heavy, panicked footfalls through the shale. Now the roles were inverted.

The truck jolted violently as the dirt road dissolved into a clearing of mud and gravel. The North Branch of the Potomac rushed past just yards away, swollen, black, and roaring. Miller's cruiser was gone now — towed, taped off. But the ruts were still there.

"We walk from here," Cal said, killing the engine.

They stepped out into the downpour. The air tasted of wet earth and iron. Marcus clicked on the flashlight, sweeping the beam across the dilapidated wooden planks of the Blackwood launch. Half of it had rotted into the river.

"Look at the brush," Marcus muttered, throwing the light toward a thicket of rhododendrons.

Cal followed the beam. The heavy branches were snapped, the mud beneath them churned into deep, fresh ruts. Not from Miller's cruiser. Deeper.

"Truck tires. Dual rear axles. That's a heavy-duty rig."

"Not just a rig," Marcus said, crouching by the water's edge, heedless of the mud soaking his jeans. He shone the light on a discarded plastic seal floating in a puddle. Red. Tamper-evident cargo lock, snapped in half. "The Dixie Syndicate uses these when they haul freight across state lines through the mountains. High-grade pharmaceuticals or synthetic precursor chemicals. Red means precursor. Blue is finished pills. This is the stuff you make fentanyl out of."

"Miller wasn't just tracking a local thief," Cal realized, his law-enforcement training kicking in. "He was sitting on a major interstate drop point. They were pooling it in the river to dilute the chemical smell, then trucking it to Baltimore."

"And Burke's getting a cut to look the other way," Marcus said. "Ten grand a month buys a lot of looking the other way in a county where the Sheriff makes fifty."

Suddenly, the flashlight beam caught a metallic glint pinned beneath a submerged log at the edge of the rushing current.

Cal waded into the freezing, knee-deep water, the current pulling hard against his boots. He reached down and hauled the object loose. It was a shattered, mud-caked police-issue dashcam unit. The housing was cracked, but the solid-state memory drive inside was sealed in a waterproof casing.

"Miller's dashcam," Cal said, wiping the grit from the lens. "He must have ripped it out or kicked it under before they killed him."

"And whoever ambushed him missed it in the dark," Marcus added.

Before Cal could step back onto the bank, high beams shattered the darkness from the ridge above. A pair of headlights cut through the trees, descending the logging road at high speed. The low, aggressive whine of a V8 engine echoed off the mountain walls.

"We've got company," Marcus snarled, turning off his flashlight. "And they aren't looking to write us a citation."

The roar of the incoming V8 engine drowned out the rushing Potomac as Cal and Marcus lunged into the dense rhododendron thicket.

A sleek, blacked-out Ram 2500 skidded to a halt. The doors flew open. Two men stepped out, silhouetted against the blinding high beams. They wore heavy canvas jackets and carried short-barreled tactical shotguns.

It was the same truck from the checkpoint.

"Truck's still warm!" one yelled over the storm. "Dawson's here! Check the bank!"

Cal pressed his back against a dripping oak tree, shoving the muddy dashcam unit deep into his coat pocket. He didn't have his service weapon. His hand instinctively hovered over his empty belt.

Marcus leaned close, his breath hot against Cal's ear. "The keys still in your ignition?"

"No. Pocket."

"Good. They're focused on the riverbank. Follow me, move low, and don't make a damn sound."

Marcus slipped through the briars like a ghost, utilizing the exact poaching trails he'd run as a teenager. Cal followed, his boots sinking into the muck, his heart hammering against his ribs. Seven years ago, Cal had been the hunter. Now he was the liability.

They circled wide, using the deafening downpour as cover, until they reached the blind side of the attackers' truck. Marcus didn't hesitate. He pulled his heavy folding knife from his pocket and jammed it into the valve stem of the Ram's rear driver-side tire. A sharp hiss was instantly swallowed by the thunder. He moved to the front tire and did the same.

"Hey!" a voice barked from the riverbank. "Who's up there?"

"Go!" Marcus yelled.

They broke into a sprint toward the F-150. Cal slammed into the driver's seat and cranked the engine. The old Ford roared to life just as a shotgun blast shattered the passenger-side mirror, spraying glass across Marcus as he dove inside.

Cal slammed the truck into reverse, spinning the tires in the deep mud, then threw it into drive. The F-150 fishtailed out of the clearing and rocketed up the mountain road, leaving the roaring, flat-tired Ram stranded in the dark, its high beams cutting uselessly into the rain.

Behind them, the Potomac kept rushing, black and indifferent, over the place where Miller had died.

Here are Chapters Seven and Eight — the middle of the night where they finally see what Miller died for.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE FRUIT BARN

Forty minutes later, the Ford was hidden beneath a camouflage tarp behind a collapsed, forgotten fruit barn on the ridge above Keyser.

The barn belonged to Marcus's uncle, Eldon Vance. Eldon had grown apples here when Nixon was president, until the deer ate more than he could pick and the county stopped paving the road. Now it was a place for rusted tractors and things people didn't want found. Marcus had spent two summers here as a kid, hiding from his mother's boyfriends.

"We can't stay long," Marcus said, cutting the engine. "Eldon don't come up here no more, but hunters do."

Inside the barn's dry, shadowed interior, the rain on the tin roof was a constant drum. The air smelled of old wood and mouse droppings. Marcus set up a battery-powered camping lantern he found on a shelf. He sat on an upturned milk crate, cleaning glass shards off his jacket where the shotgun blast had taken the mirror, while Cal used a pocket tool to carefully unscrew the waterproof casing of Deputy Miller's shattered dashcam.

Cal's hands were shaking. Not from cold.

With a click, the solid-state memory drive popped free. It was no bigger than a matchbook, sealed in black plastic. Miller had bought it himself - the county was too cheap to buy the good ones.

"I have an old ruggedized laptop in my duffel," Cal said, pulling the tech from his pack. "Isolated network. No GPS ping. Evidence guys in Romney use these in the field so the defense can't say we uploaded it to the cloud."

He slotted the drive into a universal card reader and plugged it into the USB port. The laptop was a Panasonic Toughbook, battered, its rubber corners chewed from years in a cruiser.

The screen flickered to life, casting a stark blue glow over their faces. Rain ticked on the roof.

Cal clicked into the root directory. Three files.

MILLER_04-12_DASH_01.mp4 MILLER_04-12_DASH_02.mp4 MILLER_04-12_AUDIO_01.wav

He opened the first video.

The video showed the rain-slicked windshield of Miller's cruiser. Time stamp: 02:14 AM. Miller was parked in the very clearing they had just escaped. In the headlights, a massive tractor-trailer with a generic white cab was backing up to the river launch. The trailer had no logo. That was the point.

A man stepped into the frame to guide the trailer. He wore a yellow high-visibility rain jacket, but when he turned to face the cruiser, the dashcam caught his profile perfectly.

Marcus let out a sharp, low whistle. "Well, look at that. The law enforcement cooperation package."

It was Sheriff Tom Burke.

On the video, Burke walked up to Miller's driver-side window. The audio was muffled by the rain and the cruiser's own engine, but Burke's voice cut through.

"I told you to stay on the highway patrol, kid. You just couldn't let it go."

Miller's voice, terrified, younger than Cal remembered: "Sheriff, this is Dixie Syndicate weight. Fentanyl precursors. You're letting them pool it right here in the valley? This is... this is thousands of doses, Sheriff."

Burke didn't answer. He drew his weapon. Not his county-issue .45. A .357 Magnum with walnut grips. Cal's gun.

"You're a good kid, Frank," Burke said on the video. "But you don't understand how a county stays alive."

The camera jolted violently as the first shot was fired through the window. The second was almost immediate. The video feed cut to static two seconds later as Miller, dying, apparently kicked the unit loose from the windshield bracket.

The barn went silent except for the rain.

Cal stared at the frozen frame of his former boss holding the smoking gun. The betrayal tasted like ash. The gun in Burke's hand was his father's gun. The man in the cruiser was the kid who wanted to be him.

"He killed him," Cal said. It wasn't a realization. It was a confirmation of something he'd known since he saw the boot print. "He killed his own deputy, stole my suspended service weapon from the evidence locker to execute him, and framed me to keep the Syndicate's pipeline open."

Marcus leaned back, his eyes locked on the screen, a dark grin playing on his lips that didn't reach his eyes.

"You know what this means, Trooper? You aren't just trying to prove your innocence anymore. You're trying to take down the entire power structure of this county. That video doesn't just put Burke in Mount Olive. It puts Ellis Cobb and half the county commission in there with him."

The blue light of the laptop screen cast long, skeletal shadows across the rotting timbers.

Cal closed the laptop, the snap of the plastic casing sounding like a gunshot in the quiet.

"We can't just leak this to the local media," he said, rubbing his eyes. The gash on his forearm from seven years ago throbbed. "The Mineral Daily News-Tribune prints what Burke tells them to print. If we send it to the state police barracks in Romney, Burke's moles will flag it before it hits the captain's desk. Harris trusts Burke more than he trusts me right now."

"And if you try to drive it to the federal building in Elkins, you won't make it past the county line," Marcus added, sharpening his folding knife on a smooth river stone. Whew. Whew. The rhythmic sound was hypnotic. "Burke's got every backroad locked down by now. He knows we got away from his cleanup crew at the river. He's got that Ram's dashcam, he's got your Ford's plate."

Cal stood up, pacing the dirt floor. His boots left dark prints.

"We need a secure, external broadcast point. Someone outside the county loop, but someone with enough juice to force the federal authorities to step in immediately. Not state. Federal."

Marcus paused his sharpening, the blade glinting in the lantern light. "I know a guy. Lives just over the state line in McCoole, Maryland. Calls himself 'Preach.' He's an old-school ham radio operator and dark-web data runner. He handles encrypted communications for the independent operations that refuse to pay tribute to the Dixie Syndicate. He has a satellite uplink that bypasses the local towers entirely."

"A felon network," Cal muttered, a wry smile cutting through his exhaustion for the first time in two days.

"An efficient network," Marcus corrected, standing up. He winced as his shoulder twinged - an old Mount Olive injury. "But getting across the bridge into Maryland is going to be a suicide run. Burke will have cruisers stationed at the bridge on Route 220. He owns the bridge."

Cal looked down at his muddy boots, his tactical brain mapping the geography of the Potomac crossings. The rain had taught him every ditch.

"Then we don't use the bridge," he said. "We use the old railroad trestle behind the paper mill. It's narrow, it's dark, and they can't park a cruiser on it."

"It's also a hundred feet above a flooded river, and if a coal train comes, we're fish food," Marcus said. He held Cal's gaze for a long beat, assessing the former trooper's nerve. The man who had chased him through a breaker and then cut his sentence in half.

"I like it," Marcus said. "Let's go."

Cal pulled the hard drive from the reader and put it in his breast pocket, over his heart. He left the broken dashcam housing on the milk crate for Eldon to find and wonder about.

Outside, the rain had turned to mist. The F-150 started on the third try.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE TRESTLE

The Dixie Syndicate wasn't waiting for the morning light.

As Cal's F-150 crept through the shadow of the shuttered Luke paper mill, the scanner in Cal's hand — a cheap Baofeng he'd taken from the fruit barn, tuned to the encrypted county frequency Marcus had memorized in jail — cracked to life.

"All units, be advised. We have a confirmed sighting of the suspect vehicle near the Westernport bend. Subject Cal Dawson is considered armed and dangerous. Accompanying him is a known associate, Marcus Vance. Use lethal force if non-compliance is indicated. Orders straight from the Sheriff."

"He's burning the script," Cal whispered, turning off the truck's dashboard lights. He drove by the glow of the lantern on the dash. "He's not even pretending to want an arrest anymore."

"That's because he knows what was on that dashcam," Marcus said, looking out the rear window. His hand was on his knife. "He knows you got it."

Suddenly, high beams flashed in the rearview mirror. Not a police cruiser this time, but a pair of muddy dually trucks, moving with aggressive speed through the industrial yard. The Syndicate's hunting dogs had found their scent.

"They're flanking the mill!" Marcus yelled.

Cal slammed his foot on the gas, roaring past the rusted iron skeletons of the paper processing tanks. The mill was a graveyard of industry, of jobs that had left and never come back. He drove the truck straight toward the gravel embankment leading up to the CSX railroad tracks. The F-150 groaned, its undercarriage scraping violently against the rocks as it surged up the incline, crashing through a chain-link perimeter fence that hadn't kept anyone out in twenty years.

"Hold on!" Cal shouted.

He cranked the wheel, aligning the truck's tires directly onto the wooden ties of the elevated railroad trestle. The truck bumped violently, a brutal, bone-jarring vibration as they drove out over the black, roaring chasm of the Potomac River. The ties were spaced just wide enough that if he slipped, a tire would drop and they'd be stuck, a hundred feet up.

Behind them, the Syndicate trucks skidded to a halt at the edge of the tracks. The doors flung open, and muzzle flashes shattered the dark. Bullets pinged off the F-150's tailgate and shattered the rear window, showering the cab in glass.

Cal kept his eyes locked on the narrow path ahead, the headlights illuminating the wet steel rails that led toward the safety of the Maryland shore. They were halfway across when a low, vibrating hum began to rumble through the steering wheel, up through his boots.

A distant, piercing horn wailed through the storm, from the Maryland side.

From the curve beyond the trees, the blinding single eye of an eastbound freight train rounded the bend, heading straight for the trestle. CSX 4521, a hundred and twenty cars of coal, running late.

The blinding eye of the locomotive illuminated the cab of the F-150 in stark, terrifying white. The train horn shrieked again, a deafening blast that vibrated through Cal's teeth. Thousands of tons of steel were hurtling toward them at forty miles an hour.

"Dawson!" Marcus roared over the engine whine and the oncoming thunder. "Bail! Now!"

Behind them, Syndicate gunmen were sprinting onto the trestle, their shotguns raised. Ahead lay certain death.

Cal didn't slam on the brakes. Instead, he locked his eyes on a narrow concrete maintenance platform jutting out from the side of the bridge structure — a refuge bay built for track workers in 1912, barely wide enough for two men, rusted but solid.

"The platform on the right! Jump!" Cal shouted.

He jammed his foot on the accelerator, accelerating the truck directly toward the oncoming train to close the distance to the platform. Ten yards out, Cal grabbed the ruggedized laptop bag, threw his shoulder against the driver's door, and dove into the wet dark. Marcus launched himself from the passenger side a split second later.

Cal hit the rusted iron grating of the maintenance bay, the impact knocking the wind from his lungs. He rolled, desperately clutching the laptop to his chest, his father's gun — no, Burke's crime, his gun — digging into his ribs through his pocket. Beside him, Marcus slammed into the heavy steel railing, groaning in pain but keeping his grip on the structure.

An instant later, the locomotive struck the F-150.

The collision was apocalyptic. The sound of tearing metal and shattering glass echoed across the river valley as the massive train plowed through the truck, grinding it into a crumpled mass of steel and tossing it over the side of the trestle into the roaring Potomac below. The train's emergency brakes screamed, sparks flying from the wheels like a cascade of fireworks as the massive engine roared past Cal and Marcus's tiny platform, missing them by inches. The gale-force wind from the passing coal cars threatened to rip them from the grating. For ninety seconds, the world was only noise and wind and coal dust.

On the West Virginia side of the bridge, the Syndicate hunters scrambled backward, fleeing the crushing momentum of the halting train.

When the last car passed, silence rushed back in, broken only by the river and the hiss of the train's brakes a quarter-mile down the track.

"You alive?" Cal gasped, coughing up rain and grit.

Marcus slowly pushed himself up, clutching his shoulder, his face pale but his eyes burning with something that looked like manic laughter.

"I'm going to kill you, Dawson," he said. "If the train doesn't do it, I'm going to do it myself. Let's get off this damn bridge before that conductor calls the real cops."

They climbed down the maintenance ladder on the Maryland side, hand over hand, a hundred feet above the water. By the time their boots hit Maryland mud, Cal's F-150 was gone — somewhere at the bottom of the Black River, along with his father's old toolbox in the bed.

Cal looked at the water, then at Marcus.

"We walk from here," Cal said.

Marcus nodded toward the faint glow of McCoole through the trees.

"Preach's place is twenty minutes that way. And Dawson? Next time you have a plan that involves driving into a train, tell me earlier so I can shoot you first and save us the trouble."

Here are Chapters Nine through Eleven - the bunker, the river, and the mountain.

CHAPTER NINE: PREACH

Twenty minutes later, soaked to the bone and shivering, they reached the outskirts of McCoole, Maryland.

McCoole wasn't a town so much as a suggestion that West Virginia had ended. A gas station, a post office that closed at noon, and gravel lanes that disappeared into trees. Marcus led Cal down a forgotten lane to a small, unassuming cinderblock building surrounded by a graveyard of old satellite dishes and rusted ham radio towers that leaned like drunks. No sign. No mailbox. A single security light with no bulb.

Marcus knocked on the heavy steel door in a rapid, rhythmic sequence. Three fast, two slow, three fast. Shave-and-a-haircut.

A tiny view-slot slid open. A pair of bloodshot eyes peered out through thick lenses. The air that came through the slot smelled of solder and coffee that had been on a burner for a week.

The door unlocked with a series of heavy mechanical clicks — three deadbolts, a bar — swinging open to reveal a man known only as Preach. He was sixty, wore a faded flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off despite the cold, a chaotic gray beard, and an earpiece connected to a blinking radio scanner that never left his head.

"Vance," Preach muttered, his voice a gravelly tobacco-stained rasp. "Word on the scanner is you're a dead man walking. Maryland State's got a BOLO for two white males, one ex-con, one ex-Trooper, last seen stealing a coal train's right-of-way. And you brought a cop to my door?"

"He's not a cop tonight, Preach. He's a target," Marcus said, pushing past him into the bunker. "And we have a delivery to make."

The interior of the building was a claustrophobe's nightmare of high-tech paranoia. Rows of modified servers hummed in the dark, cooled by loud industrial fans that made it hard to hear. Oscilloscopes, radio transceivers, and flat-screen monitors displaying live global network traffic lined the walls. In the corner, a ham radio rig from 1978 sat next to a quantum-encrypted router from last year. Preach lived in the seams.

Cal slid the ruggedized laptop onto a cluttered workbench, clearing away a pile of circuit boards with his forearm. Water dripped off him onto the electronics.

"We have the original dashcam drive from Deputy Miller's vehicle," Cal said. His teeth were chattering. "It contains video evidence of Sheriff Tom Burke executing him to cover up a Dixie Syndicate pharmaceutical drop at Blackwood. We need to get it off the mountain."

Preach's cynical demeanor vanished. He leaned over the laptop as Cal plugged in the universal reader and brought up the video. As the footage played — showing Burke drawing Cal's own .357 and killing his own deputy — Preach let out a slow, low whistle that turned into a cough.

"This is the holy grail of crooked county law," Preach whispered. "I been hearing Burke was taxing the river for two years. Nobody had proof that would stick. If we just dump this on a public site, Burke's tech team will issue a takedown notice or flag it as an AI deepfake within ten minutes. Half the county will believe him. We have to blindside them."

"Can you route it past the local servers?" Cal asked.

"I can do better," Preach said, his fingers already flying across a mechanical keyboard with dizzying speed, despite his swollen knuckles. "I'm going to hook into a decentralized encrypted media protocol. I'll broadcast the raw video data directly to the federal judiciary server in Baltimore, the FBI field office in Pittsburgh, and simultaneously mirror it across twelve independent public news servers. Once I hit 'Enter,' it populates everywhere at once. Burke won't be able to scrub it. It'll be chain-of-custody verified by three federal nodes."

He slotted the card reader into his own terminal. A progress bar appeared on his main monitor: Encrypting Data... 45%... The upload speed was a thin blue line.

"How long?" Marcus asked, looking at the steel door.

"Four minutes, maybe five. Storm's throttling my sat uplink."

Cal finally let himself breathe. Five minutes.

Suddenly, the overhead lights flickered and died, plunging the room into darkness. A split second later, the server racks whined as a backup generator kicked in, bathing the bunker in an eerie red emergency glow. The fans stuttered, then roared louder.

Preach froze, his headset crackling with static. He looked up at Cal and Marcus, his eyes wide behind his glasses.

"They didn't just cut the power grid to this sector," he said. "My external perimeter sensors just went dark. Someone just clipped the fiber lines outside. And my RF detector is going nuts."

From the gravel driveway outside, the crunch of heavy boots on stone cut through the sound of the rain and the generator.

The progress bar crawled with agonizing slowness in the red light. 62%... 63%...

"How long, Preach?" Cal demanded, his voice tight. He stepped away from the workbench, surveying the cinderblock walls. There were no windows, leaving them with only one way in — and one way out.

"Four minutes, maybe five," Preach hissed, his fingers flying across a backup terminal to reroute. "The fiber line cut dropped my primary data pipe. I'm routing the rest of the encryption packet through an old satellite uplink, but the storm is throttling the bandwidth. Don't touch that deck, or the handshake fails."

THUD.

The heavy steel front door shuddered under the impact of a breaching ram. Outside, the crunch of gravel was replaced by shouting.

"Open the door, Dawson!" a voice boomed through the metal speaker grill, distorted by rain and rage. It wasn't a Syndicate grunt. It was Sheriff Tom Burke himself. He'd crossed the state line. "We know you're in there. You've got nowhere left to run. Give us the drive, and Vance walks out of here alive!"

Marcus let out a harsh, dry chuckle, checking the blade of his folding knife. "He's lying, Dawson. Burke doesn't leave loose ends. Especially not ones that spent five years at Mount Olive."

Cal turned to Preach. "You've lived in this bunker for a decade, Preach. Tell me you didn't build a fortress with only one door."

Preach didn't look up from his screen, but he pointed a grease-stained finger toward the back of the server bank. "Behind the third rack. There's a drainage access hatch. It cuts straight through the limestone ridge and empties into the old Luke mill discharge pipe by the river. But it's a tight squeeze, and if we leave now, the terminal shuts down and the hash fails. We lose chain of custody."

"We aren't leaving," Cal said. He looked at Marcus. "We need to buy four minutes. What do we have?"

Marcus scanned the tech-cluttered shelves, his eyes landing on a row of heavy, industrial-grade lithium-ion battery banks used for the servers. The kind that could run a house for a day.

"Preach, are these wired in a series?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Because if you short-circuit a lithium cell that size, it doesn't just spark," Marcus said, a dangerous grin spreading across his face. The same grin he'd had in the breaker at nineteen. "It cooks."

Marcus yanked a thick copper grounding wire from a nearby workbench. He ran toward the front entryway just as a second heavy THUD buckled the top hinge of the steel door. Light from the attackers' flashlights flickered through the widening gap.

Cal grabbed a heavy iron pry bar from the corner, positioning himself blindly to the side of the doorframe. "Marcus, get ready!"

The third impact shattered the lock mechanism. The steel door swung open, and the first Syndicate gunner stepped into the red glow, his shotgun raised. It was Ellis Cobb himself.

Cal didn't hesitate. He swung the pry bar with all his weight, catching the man squarely across the forearm. The shotgun clattered to the floor. Cal grabbed the man's vest, pulling him forward to block the doorway against the second attacker.

"Now, Vance!" Cal roared.

Marcus jammed the exposed copper wire directly into the high-voltage output terminals of the main backup battery bank, then kicked the shorted unit straight out the open doorway into the wet gravel where Burke's men were gathering.

The lithium battery violently ruptured.

A blinding, white-hot chemical flash exploded in the driveway, followed by a concussive pop and a thick, toxic cloud of suffocating black smoke that smelled like burning plastic and jet fuel. The attackers screamed, blinded and choking, falling back into the dark rain. Burke himself was thrown back against his cruiser, his yellow rain jacket smoking.

"Dawson, Vance! Get down!" Preach yelled from the back of the room.

Cal dove over the workbench as a volley of blind gunfire tore through the smoke, shattering Preach's overhead monitors in a shower of sparks.

On the central terminal, the progress bar flashed green.

UPLOAD COMPLETE. DATA DISTRIBUTED TO 14 NODES. HASH VERIFIED.

At that exact moment, sixty miles away in the federal building in Baltimore, a high-priority alert bypassed the firewall of the FBI's regional cyber-crimes division. Simultaneously, a mirror packet decrypted on the desk of the Assistant U.S. Attorney. The raw video of Sheriff Tom Burke executing his deputy was now permanently etched into the federal record, with a time stamp no local judge could suppress.

"It's done," Preach gasped, yanking a portable hard drive from the console and shoving it into Cal's hand. "That's the master log with the hash. Now get the hell out of my bunker!"

Marcus was already behind the third server rack, throwing his weight against a rusted iron hatch in the floor. "Dawson, move! The smoke is clearing!"

Cal grabbed Preach by the shoulder. "You're coming with us."

"In that pipe? I'd get stuck in the first turn," Preach muttered, pulling a hidden shotgun from beneath his desk, his hands steady now. "I'll surrender to the Maryland state troopers when they show up to see what the noise is about. You got me federal witnesses now. Burke can't touch me once the feds lock this place down. Go!"

Cal and Marcus dropped into the dark, wet belly of the limestone hatch just as the front door was kicked entirely off its hinges and Burke's flashlight beam cut through the black smoke.

CHAPTER TEN: THE RIVER

The drainage pipe tasted of copper and stagnant river water. It was thirty inches in diameter, lined with slime that had been there since the mill dumped chemicals legally.

Cal and Marcus crawled on their bellies, pushing the laptop bag ahead of them, breathing through their mouths. Behind them, they could hear shouting, then a single shotgun blast from Preach's bunker, then more shouting. Then sirens — not county sirens. The high-pitched, dual-tone warble of Maryland State Police and federal tactical vehicles moving fast on Route 135.

The pipe dropped six inches and then emptied. They fell.

They dropped from the concrete lip of the discharge tube, tumbling ten feet onto the muddy banks of the Potomac just as the dawn began to crack the eastern sky over Green Ridge State Forest. The rain had finally slowed to a gray, miserable mist that made the river look like it was steaming.

Cal pulled himself up, his limbs aching, his jacket torn. He pulled the master log drive from his pocket, ensuring it was still dry in its little waterproof case, then looked back up at the ridge. From McCooles, the sirens were louder now.

"It's starting," Cal said, his voice a low gravel rasp.

Marcus wiped a streak of black grease from his forehead, his dark eyes fixed on the West Virginia side of the river, on home.

"Burke isn't going to sit around and wait for the FBI to cuff him, Dawson. He knows the timeline. He knows he has maybe an hour before the federal warrants are processed and tactical teams from Pittsburgh and Baltimore converge on Keyser."

Cal's phone — a burner he'd kept buried in his pack, dry in a sandwich bag — vibrated violently. He pulled it out. The screen displayed an unlisted number with a Baltimore area code. He swiped to answer.

"Dawson," a voice barked. It was crisp, authoritative, and entirely devoid of Appalachian inflection. "This is Special Agent In Charge Vance Miller, FBI, Baltimore Field Office. We received the data transmission from the McCooles node. The verification team has authenticated the digital signature on the dashcam unit. We have a federal grand jury issuing an emergency indictment for Sheriff Tom Burke and six named associates for civil rights violations, murder, and racketeering."

Cal closed his eyes. Vance Miller. Frank's older brother.

"Agent Miller," Cal said. "Frank was —"

"I know who Frank was," Miller cut him off, but not unkindly. "He called you because you were the only one he trusted. You were right to trust Preach. He's in Maryland custody and talking. Where are you?"

"East bank, below the mill discharge," Cal said, his eyes scanning the ridgeline. "But you need to get teams into the courthouse now. Burke won't surrender. He has a private airfield near the old strip mine on Knobley Mountain. If he gets to his Cessna, he's gone. He has cash, passports."

"We're deploying regional SWAT out of Cumberland and Martinsburg," Agent Miller replied. "But we're forty-five minutes out from full containment. Dawson, stay where you are. Do not engage. You are officially a material witness under federal protection. Do not go up that mountain."

The line went dead. Federal protection from a man on a riverbank with no truck.

Cal looked at Marcus. "Forty-five minutes. Burke will be at the airfield in fifteen. If he gets in the air, the Syndicate will have him in Mexico by noon and he'll never see a courtroom. Frank never gets justice."

Marcus spat into the mud, a dark, dangerous smile returning to his face. He was bleeding from a cut on his cheek from the pipe.

"The dually truck they used to hunt us at the river — the one I poked holes in. They abandoned it by the rail yard when the train hit your Ford. I bet the keys are still in it, and I know how to patch a tire using a roadside emergency kit from the maintenance shed by the tracks. Takes two minutes if you got a compressor."

Cal stared at him. "We'd be going against a federal order."

"We go to Knobley Mountain," Marcus said, already walking toward the tracks, limping slightly.

Cal followed. The river roared behind them.

"We go to Knobley Mountain," Cal agreed. "But we aren't doing it for the badge this time, Trooper. We're doing it to make sure the man who put me in a cage doesn't get to fly away from his own."

Marcus glanced back. "You keep calling me Trooper, I'm gonna start charging you."

CHAPTER ELEVEN: KNOBLEY

Meanwhile, inside the fortified command office of the Mineral County Courthouse, the atmosphere was chaotic in a way that a county building is never supposed to be.

Sheriff Tom Burke stood behind his heavy oak desk, his uniform shirt wrinkled, his yellow rain jacket dripping onto the rug. His eyes were bloodshot. Five computer screens on the wall behind him were flashing identical red warning banners from the state law enforcement network.

ACCESS REVOKED - CONTACT ADMINISTRATOR NCIC QUERY FLAGGED - FEDERAL HOLD

His access to the national database had been revoked. His encrypted radio channel was filling with static as state police dispatchers in Romney refused to route his calls. The scanner on his desk that had always been full of chatter was now just hiss.

The door burst open, and a frantic deputy stepped in, clutching a tactical rifle he had never fired outside qualification. Deputy Cobb, Ellis's cousin.

"Sheriff, the state line bridges are being blocked by Maryland authorities. We just got word from a spotter in Cumberland — there are three unmarked black Suburbans heading south on Route 220. Feds. Real Feds. And Preach's place is surrounded."

Burke didn't panic. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk, pulling out a heavy leather duffel bag that had been there for three years, waiting. Inside were vacuum-sealed bricks of cash — \$200,000 — and two clean passports with his photo but different names, provided by his Dixie Syndicate handlers. He checked the magazine of his personal .45 caliber pistol, slapping it home with the heel of his hand. The .357 that had killed Miller was at the bottom of the Potomac now, tossed after the murder.

"Tell the boys on the road to drop their flags and scatter," Burke ordered, his voice chillingly calm. The voice he used when a hunter was lost on the mountain and needed to be found. "The county's compromised. The Syndicate is cutting the line here. We're on our own."

"What about Dawson?" the deputy asked, his voice shaking. He was nineteen. He had voted for Burke for Sheriff in his high school mock election.

Burke walked to the window, looking out at the foggy ridges of Knobley Mountain rising in the distance, the old strip mine plateau where he kept his plane.

"Dawson's a ghost," Burke said. "But if he's the cop I think he is, he knows exactly where I'm going. He knows I don't do cages."

He grabbed the duffel bag, slipped out the courthouse side door into an unmarked cruiser that wasn't on the county inventory, and sped toward the mountain trail, lights off, setting the stage for a final, bloody confrontation on the high, fog-shrouded plateau.

Ten minutes later, the patched-up dually truck groaned as Cal slammed it into low gear, clawing its way up the gravel access road of Knobley Mountain. Marcus had patched the tires with green slime and curses, and the compressor from the maintenance shed was still rattling in the back.

The fog on the plateau was thick as sheep's wool, reducing the world to twenty feet of wet shale and skeletal pine trees that had grown back after the strip mining. The air was thin and cold.

Beside him, Marcus sat in silence, his knuckles white on the door handle. In the truck's console lay the iron pry bar and Marcus's folding knife — poor weapons against a desperate man with a firearm and nothing left to lose, but they were out of time.

The road flattened into the cleared summit of the old strip mine. Through the swirling gray mist, the silhouette of a small sheet-metal hangar appeared. Sitting on the cracked asphalt runway was a single-engine Cessna 172, its propeller already spinning in a loud, chopping whine that scattered the fog.

"There he is," Marcus barked, pointing through the windshield.

An unmarked county cruiser was parked crookedly near the plane. Sheriff Tom Burke was tossing his leather duffel bag into the passenger cockpit. Hearing the roar of the dually, Burke spun around. Even through the fog, his expression was unmistakable — a mask of pure, feral rage. The father figure was gone. Only the animal remained.

Burke drew his .45 pistol and opened fire.

Here are the final two chapters — the end of the ridge.

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE AIRFIELD

The first heavy slug from Burke's .45 shattered the dually's windshield, dead center.

Cal ducked on instinct, glass spraying across his face, and slammed his foot on the accelerator. Instead of veering away, he drove the heavy truck straight at the Cessna's tail section.

"Dawson, brace!" Marcus shouted, bracing his feet on the dash.

The truck's front bumper clipped the rear stabilizer of the plane with a sickening crunch of tearing aluminum and screaming rivets. The Cessna spun violently on its landing gear, its nose cone slamming into the dirt off the runway, its propeller chewing into the gravel and snapping with a metallic shriek. The engine choked and died, coughing black smoke. The escape route was officially dead.

Cal threw the truck into park and dove out the driver's side door into the wet shale just as another round punched through the door panel where his chest had been.

"You're done, Burke!" Cal yelled, his voice echoing off the mountain and swallowed by fog. He had no gun. He had a pry bar. "The feds have the footage! Every server from here to Richmond is printing your warrant! The bridge is blocked!"

"I built this county, Dawson!" Burke's voice boomed back through the fog, tight and panicked. He was moving behind the chassis of the ruined plane, using it for cover. He was breathing hard. "I kept this county alive when Charleston forgot us! When the mill closed! You think that courthouse runs on tax dollars? I taxed the river! A washed-up trooper and a meth-running convict aren't taking my life away!"

A sudden gunshot cracked from the left. Not Burke.

Marcus had circled wide through the tall grass while Cal was shouting, using the same poaching crawl he'd used as a kid to steal apples from this same mine's foreman. He'd thrown a heavy iron tire iron — not at Burke, but against the hangar's tin wall with everything he had.

CLANG.

Burke bit on the distraction, a rookie mistake born of panic. He turned and fired two rounds toward the hangar, toward the sound.

That split second was all Cal needed.

He broke into a dead sprint, covering the twenty yards of open asphalt in a low, textbook tackle form he hadn't used since the academy. His boots slipped on wet shale, found purchase, slipped again.

Before Burke could swing his weapon back, Cal hit him at full speed, a low, perfect form tackle that drove both men hard onto the unforgiving asphalt of the strip mine. The air left both of them.

The .45 skated away into the weeds, spinning.

Burke fought with the brutal strength of a cornered animal. He was fifty-eight but he was a mountain man, all forearms and neck. He drove a heavy fist into Cal's jaw, splitting his lip, and tore at his shirt, trying to get to his eyes. Cal tasted copper and river water.

He got on top. He pinned Burke's arms, his fingers locking around the Sheriff's throat. Seven years of frustration, betrayal, the green wool, Miller's open eyes in the cruiser, his father's toolbox at the bottom of the Potomac — it all flashed behind Cal's eyes. His grip tightened. The vein in Burke's forehead bulged.

He could end it right here. One hard twist. One more inch of pressure. It would be self-defense. Who would question it? The man had killed his deputy. Framed him. Tried to kill him twice in one night.

Burke's face went red, then purple. His hands scrabbled at Cal's wrists.

"Dawson!"

Cal glanced up through his haze of adrenaline and blood. Marcus was standing at the edge of the runway, his face grim, his shoulder bleeding where a bullet had grazed him in the exchange. He was pointing down the mountain road.

The fog was suddenly pierced by a dozen flashing red and blue strobe lights, but not the warm, familiar flash of Mineral County. These were cold, LED white-and-blue, out of sync. The deafening, multi-toned wail of federal sirens tore through the thin mountain air. A convoy of armored FBI tactical vehicles and Maryland State Police cruisers breached the tree line, their tires screaming on the wet gravel, men in vests pouring out before the trucks had stopped.

"Don't do it, Cal," Marcus said, his voice surprisingly quiet, carrying across the tarmac. "If you kill him now, you're the monster he told the county you were. You're the headline he wrote for you. Let him sit in the cage you built for him. Let Miller watch him sit there."

The words cut through Cal's rage like cold water.

Slowly, deliberately, Cal released his grip. He stood up, his knees shaking, stepping away from the gasping, beaten Sheriff just as a dozen heavily armed FBI agents swarmed the tarmac, rifles raised.

"FEDERAL AGENTS! DON'T MOVE! HANDS ON YOUR HEADS! HANDS!"

Cal raised his hands. His lip was bleeding onto his shirt. He looked over at Marcus, who did the same with a weary, ironic smile, his hands high despite the blood running down his arm.

Burke lay on the asphalt, coughing, clutching his throat, staring up at the gray sky as a boot pressed him down and cuffs locked around wrists that had worn a badge for thirty years.

From the far side of the runway, another vehicle came up the mountain road — too fast. A black Ram 2500, not police. Ellis Cobb. He had come to kill Burke to cut the loose end for the Syndicate. He saw the federal convoy and slammed on his brakes, threw it into reverse, and disappeared back into the fog, gone.

Cal saw it. The FBI saw it too. Two Suburbans broke off to chase.

Marcus walked over to Cal, breathing hard.

"You know," Marcus said, looking at Burke being dragged to his feet, "for a cop, you got a real lousy tackle. You left your feet too early."

Cal almost laughed. It came out as a sob.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DAWSON & ASSOCIATES

Three weeks later, the sun finally broke over the Allegheny ridges, burning away the lingering valley fog that had held Mineral County since April.

The Mineral County Courthouse was under federal receivership. The FBI seal was taped over the Sheriff's Department seal on the front doors. Sheriff Tom Burke and six others, including Deputy Cobb and two county commissioners, were locked in a federal holding facility in Baltimore, awaiting a trial that would dismantle the Dixie Syndicate's grip on the region from Alabama to West Virginia. The video was played on every news station from Charleston to D.C. Miller's mother was in the courtroom every day.

Cal's name had been completely cleared. Internal Affairs returned his .357 — now an evidence exhibit — and offered his badge back. The State Police Superintendent called him personally.

He turned it down.

Cal sat on the hood of a new, unblemished pickup truck — not the F-150, that was still at the bottom of the North Branch and would stay there — parked at the scenic overlook on Route 50, looking down at the winding ribbon of the Potomac River. The Black River, the old-timers called it, because it ran so dark in the spring.

He wore civilian clothes that actually fit. His forearm scar ached in the sun.

The sound of footsteps on gravel made him turn. Marcus walked up, a denim jacket thrown over his shoulders and a duffel bag in his hand. His parole officer had terminated his parole early — "exceptional cooperation in a federal racketeering investigation." His sister Lena was with him at the Iron Horse, now as owner. The county had sold it to her for a dollar to avoid a civil suit.

"Hear you got offered your badge back," Marcus said, leaning against the truck's fender. He looked healthier in the sun.

"I did," Cal replied, staring out at the mountains. "Turned it down. The green wool doesn't fit the same anymore. Besides, I got tired of asking for a warrant every time I knew where the body was."

Marcus nodded slowly. "So, what's a guy with a clean record and an investigator's brain do in a valley like this? Go work for insurance?"

Cal reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, printed business card. Thick stock. Simple. It read:

Dawson & Associates – Private Investigations *Keyser, WV – McCooles, MD We find what the river tries to hide.*

He flipped it over. Written in black ink on the back was a cell number. He handed it to the ex-felon.

"I need someone who knows how to navigate the places the law can't see," Cal said. "Someone who knows the poaching trails and the breaker and which seals are red and which are blue. The pay is terrible, the hours are worse, and the boss doesn't care about your parole officer because he doesn't have one."

Marcus looked at the card, then at Cal, then back at the card. A genuine, slow smile broke across his scarred face for the first time since Cal had known him. Not the dangerous one. The real one.

He dropped his duffel into the bed of the truck and slid into the passenger seat.

"Alright, partner," Marcus said, rolling down the window and letting the mountain air in. It didn't smell like rain anymore. It smelled like summer coming. "Let's go see who else in this county needs saving."

Cal started the truck. Below them, the Potomac — the Black River — kept moving, dark and indifferent and alive.

Behind them, on the passenger seat, Marcus's phone buzzed. Lena.

He answered on speaker.

"Where are you two at?" she said. "We got a guy in here saying his daughter didn't come home from the community college last night. Says the Sheriff's Department told him to wait 48 hours. Says he don't trust them no more."

Cal and Marcus looked at each other.

"Tell him we're on our way," Cal said.

He put the truck in drive and headed down the mountain, toward Keyser, toward the next case.

END